

SPOTLIGHT

'Genocide' was the title of the centrefold single story of the *Sunday Times* on June 13, 1971. It was Anthony Mascarenhas' 5000-word story that shook the world. As a reporter of the *Morning News* of Karachi, Mascarenhas was one of the eight journalists from West Pakistan who were taken to East Pakistan in the last week of April to show what a great job the patriotic army was doing there. But what he saw there was genocide, and that was exactly what he reported. The Pakistani government, he wrote, was "pushing through its own 'final solution' of the East Bengal problem". The accompanying editorial 'Stop Killing' charged the Pakistani government of 'premeditated extermination levelled by the facts'.

Foreign journalists began to write on the military clampdown as early as the end of March 1971, much before Mascarenhas' report was published, and

focused on human interest stories relating accounts of the Bengali people, victims, and refugees. Nearly half of the reports had a neutral tone, 14.4 percent negative, and only 35.1 percent positive.<sup>3</sup>

However, we do not find much research on television coverage. Fortunately, I got access to footage of ABC, CBS and NBC prime time news from March 25 to December 25, 1971. The footages, along with transcripts, perhaps characterise the then US administration's stance on the Liberation War of Bangladesh, and show the response of the powers involved in the war and US media. However, the focus of this short write-up is how these three US television news channels represented the Liberation War in 1971.

**Pakistan/Civil War!**

The ABC Evening News for March 25 broadcast studio news on the military crackdown in Dhaka. Ted Koppel and

declared independence. But interestingly, the accompanying commentary mentioned that "East Pakistan Leader Sheik Mujibur Rahman wants improved relations with India."

CBS and NBC similarly termed the massacre a "civil war" on the next day, March 26, and used a clip from French Television Film by Frank Mcgee that gave a background of the situation and Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's recorded interview. As a result, news on the Liberation War was named, broadcasted

by Richard Lindley of the BBC: (Jessore, E. Pakistan) Film shows Jessore villagers killed by West Pakistan army before retreating; West Pakistan now beginning counterattack; rebels living on coconuts; accounts on both sides exaggerated.

West Pakistan begins counterattack? Who were the attackers then? The same tone is in later reports as well: CBS Evening News for 1971-04-11: (E. Pakistan) West Pakistan army

refuge in the border districts of India. Instead, from early April, ABC, CBS and NBC started to report on West Pakistan's claim of Indians crossing the border to help rebels.

Walter Cronkite reports: (Studio) West Pakistan charges India volunteers infiltrating into East Pakistan to aid rebels (CBS Evening News for 1971-04-05)

David Brinkly reports: (Studio) East Pakistan rebellion continues... Indians repeatedly crossing border

interference in civil war. NBC Evening News reported the same day:

(Studio) Communist China accuses India of supporting East Pakistan rebels; last week, USSR indirectly supported rebels.

Support of China for West Pakistan was highlighted quite often. CBS Evening News for May 1 again reported:

(Studio) West Pakistan says China (People's Republic) offered to increase aid to help West Pakistan

now turned to 'Pakistan/Civil War/India', 'India/Cholera', 'India/Refugee/Cholera', 'India/Cholera', and 'India/Refugees', and that is what it continued to be called until nearly the end of the war, and incessantly till mid-June for certain. The refugee crisis was undeniable, but there was a tension of who was winning in this politically crafted humanitarian race. I would like to share one particular incidence.

Walter Cronkite in the CBS Evening News of June 14 and Howard K. Smith on the next day reported that USSR had helped fly East Pakistan refugees from Calcutta to central India. In both the cases, the accompanying footage showed the poor living conditions in refugee camps. But the interesting part was when American aircrafts were shown transporting refugees. They broadcasted a clip comparing US' process of flying people with that of the USSR, emphasising that their way was far better because the crew showed the

was considered fallen? I do not know if this naming means something, but I certainly know that the 16th of December was the day of victory for the Bengali people, the day we regained Dhaka from the occupying Pakistan forces. It would be understandable if Pakistan media was saying 'Dacca Falls'. But why US television channels would term our victory as such, is beyond comprehension.

However, the last news I would cite here is NBC Evening News for December 16. The news was named simply 'Bangladesh'. John Chancellor reported: (Studio) New nation of Bangladesh profiled. 8th largest in world in population; 1 of the poorest (USD 77/yr/person); geographically size of Arkansas. Flag includes map of nation in gold. Problems cited: returning refugees, rebuilding of war rubble. Political turmoil probable with leader in jail; dependence on India necessary. The media is not only words, symbols

# THE WAR OF FOOTAGE

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Screenshots from ABC and CBS News footage.

many of the stories referred to the event as "massacre", "slaughter" and "tragedy". *New Nation* from Singapore and the *Saturday Review* from New York used the terms "holocaust" and "genocide". However, it was Mascarenhas' eye-witness account that attracted the world press to the magnitude of the Bangladeshi crisis.

An interesting research shows that in Britain, from March to December 1971, *The Times* published 29 editorials, *The Daily Telegraph* published 39, *The Guardian*, 37, *The Observer* put out 15, and *The Financial Times*, 13. BBC broadcast at least eight episodes of *Panorama*, the investigative current affairs programme, on the war.<sup>2</sup>

But content wise, the reports neither focused on the humanitarian grounds of the war nor did they support the Bangladeshi people's struggle. A research cast light on the content of the reports of *The New York Times* and *The Times* (London). Analysing the front page reportage of these two, the research found that 34 percent dealt with military conflict dimensions of the crisis, 30.5 percent with its potential consequences, and only 16.8 percent

Harry Reasoner reported: (Dacca, E. Pakistan) Negotiations break down, results in Civil War; only West Pakistan has professional army; East Pakistan leaders speak of fighting Vietnam style guerrilla war; those involved in training following British model for army know nothing about guerrilla warfare.

This 20-second news in fact says a lot. It not only termed the military crackdown of the Pakistan government on the unarmed people of Bangladesh in the dark of night a 'civil war', but it also highlighted the supremacy of the professional army of Pakistan over the people's resistance to this oppression. It said that although East Pakistani leaders spoke about Vietnamese style guerrilla fighting, they in fact knew nothing about it. This first news after the massacre of the 25th in Dhaka thus distorted the truth of the cruel, premeditated killing by the Pakistani Army as civil war, and trivialised the people's resistance by saying "they know nothing about guerrilla warfare."

ABC Evening News for March 26 reiterated the situation in Bangladesh as civil war, mentioning that East Pakistan

and preserved as 'Pakistan/Civil War' in all the three channels. The name persisted for a long time, till it was replaced by the title 'India-Pakistan War'.

**'Rebellions Crushed'/'Rebellions Not Totally Crushed'**

Interestingly, both CBS and NBC claimed that "East Pakistan rebellion [has been] crushed" on March 28. The name of the news remained the same: 'Pakistan/Civil War'. On April 1, CBS Evening news reported, 'East Pakistan rebels capture Jessore'; they substantiate this information with the next line: "West Pakistan charges Indians crossing into East Pakistan to fight with rebels."

NBC Evening News the same day reported, "West Pakistan radio continues to maintain East Pakistan rebellion crushed," while CBS Evening News on April 2 broadcasted a very interesting short report:

(Studio) West Pakistan admits for 1st time East Pakistan rebellion not completely crushed.

It then went on to broadcast the report

What is interesting was that support for East Pakistan by any country or world personality, other than USSR, was hardly ever mentioned in news. Even the famous 'Concert for Bangladesh' by George Harrison and Pandit Ravi Shankar went unaired by these channels.

controls large East Pakistan cities... East Pakistan rifles are main rebel strength, but no match for West Pakistan army... rebels unorganised; refugees crossing into India by hundreds.

**Indians crossing borders to help rebels!**

After the dark night of March 25, people from East Bengal crossed over to take

to fight with rebels. (NBC Evening News for 1971-04-05)

**Both sides involved in 'Execution of civilians'**

NBC Evening News for April 6 reported: Both rebels and West Pakistan army involved in executions of opposition civilians, while the accompanying footage described:

(Teheran, Iran) Film shows plane load of Americans arriving in Teheran from East Pakistan. [Unidentified Americans say many Pakistani friends now dead; husband, father still there; many endanger lives if speak too freely.]

**The introduction of 'China' and 'Soviet Union' in the scenario**

Interestingly, one may find clear bias in the way these news channels introduced the positions of superpowers in the war. For example, CBS Evening News for April 7 reported: (Studio) Communist China supports West Pakistan in East Pakistan rebellion; charges India with

against East Pakistan rebels. On the contrary, support of USSR for East Pakistan was always interspersed with China's opposing position, for example, ABC Evening News for April 12: (Studio) USSR Leaders Brezhnev and Podgorny criticise West Pakistan by bloodshed in East Pakistan; Premier Kosygin meets with West Pakistan and India Ambassadors. Communist China pledges support for West Pakistan, criticises India.

What is interesting was that support for East Pakistan by any country or world personality, other than USSR, was hardly ever mentioned in news. Even the famous 'Concert for Bangladesh' by George Harrison and Pandit Ravi Shankar went unaired by these channels. To be on the safe side, no footage was ever found regarding this concert in the archives, even though newspapers filmed the event extensively.

**India enters the 'Pakistan/Civil War' hash**

The denomination 'Pakistan/Civil War'

passengers how to buckle up and at the end of the trip gave them chocolate.

India turned to be the centre of the news eventually. Senator Kennedy's visit to refugee camps, Kissinger's visit to India and Pakistan, Indira Gandhi's world tour, the Nixon-Indira meeting, India's Friendship Treaty with Soviet Union—this series of events brought India to the spotlight. The titles of the report started to turn into India/Refugees/US AID, India/Kissinger/Refugees/Agnew, India/Kissinger, or India/Kissinger/US-Pakistan Aid. Finally, by the end of August, or at most the early days of September, the whole 'Pakistan/Civil War' tag had been transformed into the 'India-Pakistan War'.

**Dhaka falls!**

It was December 16. The result of the war had been decided. Bangladesh emerged as a new nation in the world. The headline of CBS Evening News for December 16 is 'India-Pakistan/Dacca Falls'. That of NBC Evening News for December 16 is also 'India-Pakistan/Dacca Falls'. For whom Dhaka

or codes; it is the centre of targeted selectiveness implemented through a plethora of expressive means. We do not convey reality the way it is; the language we use shapes our perspective of it. And our language is the media. Information is not only the fact – it is also its formation as a media event. Information – presented or suppressed – both tell about the deeper meaning and the deeper politics of an event or history. The absence of the people's war in the footage of the media, and the absence of the word 'Bangladesh' till the very end of the time, speaks volumes of the associated politics. And footage speaks volume about the war.

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1 For instance, *New York Times*, 28 March 1971, 31 March 1971, 7 April 1971; *The Guardian*, 31 March 1971; *Times* [London], 3 April 1971; *New Statesman* [London], 16 April 1971.  
2 Harun-or-Rashid. 1995. "British perspectives, Pressures and Publicity Regarding Bangladesh, 1971", *Contemporary South Asia* 4(2): 140-41.  
3 Mohammed Delwar Hossain. 2010. "Framing the Liberation War of Bangladesh in the U.S. and the U.K. Media: A Content Analysis of The New York Times and The Times (London)". M.A. thesis, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale. Cited in Srinath Raghban. 2013. 1971: A Global History of the Creation of Bangladesh, Harvard University Press.